



NOAA, NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE, WEATHER FORECAST OFFICE

Miami, Florida 33165



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Monday January 31st: Lightning Awareness Day

Lightning is one of nature's deadliest and most unpredictable phenomena, but also one of its most common. Although meteorologists can detect the location of thunderstorms and forecast their general movement, it is virtually impossible to predict exactly where the next lightning bolt may strike. This fact makes lightning one of nature's biggest killers.

During any given year, lightning kills an average of 2 people in south Florida, with an additional 9 people injured. Fortunately, no deaths were attributed to lightning in south Florida in 2010. However, a total of 7 people were reported to have been injured as a result of a direct lightning strike. Statistics show that most people struck by lightning aren't killed. However, lightning strikes are often debilitating, with effects that can linger for a lifetime.

A dangerous misperception about lightning is that it only strikes when dark clouds are directly overhead. Several cases in the past few years have proven this to be false. Lightning commonly strikes several miles away from the heavy rain area of the thunderstorm, and in some cases can strike up to 10 miles away or more! This type of lightning is misleadingly referred to as "dry lightning" or "bolts from the blue", but they actually originate from the side of a thunderstorm cloud and are just as deadly as those that occur in the middle of a heavy downpour. Therefore, the greatest danger often comes with the first or last flash because that's when people least expect lightning to strike.

Here's a simple lightning safety tip that can save your life: When you see lightning or hear thunder, head to the nearest safe building. The inside of a vehicle can also be used as a place of shelter only if there are no buildings nearby. Darkening clouds are usually the first sign that lightning may strike nearby.

Recent studies have shown that teenage boys are the most likely group to be killed by lightning in Florida. The age group from 10 to 19 years of age has the greatest number of deaths, followed by those in their 30s and 20s. The number of 10 to 19 year old lightning deaths is greater than the number of lightning deaths of those 40 and older.

Since 1959 the three southeast Florida counties of Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach have experienced a combined 94 lightning deaths, the most of any three contiguous counties in the United States. This includes 35 deaths in Miami-Dade County, 32 in Broward County and 27 in Palm Beach County.

Although the National Weather Service does not issue specific lightning warnings, products such as the Hazardous Weather Outlook and the Surf Forecast describe the daily lightning danger in south Florida on a scale ranging from none, to slight, to moderate to high. When a storm producing excessive lightning is observed or is imminent, a Special Weather Statement/Significant Weather Advisory is issued to alert of its location. Checking these products before venturing outside can make the difference between life and death.

Remember, any thunderstorm can produce a lightning flash which can kill you and those nearby.

Some locations are more dangerous than others. The greatest numbers of people in Florida are struck while near a body of water. Many others are struck while standing under trees. Another vulnerable location is an open area with few trees such as a ball field, playground or golf course. School related activities also rate high in lightning vulnerability. These include walking to and from school and after school events.

The large number of high rise buildings in south Florida also puts construction workers and even residents in upper floors at a greater risk since tall objects are struck by lightning much more frequently than objects close to the ground.

No place outdoors is safe from lightning. Even the inside of an automobile, while safer than being outside, is not as safe as being inside an enclosed building. If planning to be outdoors, stay informed of the latest weather conditions by listening to NOAA Weather Radio or by monitoring the latest forecasts via TV, radio, cell phone or the internet. Be prepared to take shelter inside an enclosed building if a thunderstorm approaches or forms nearby.

For further lightning information, as well as daily hazardous weather outlooks which indicate the threat of lightning over south Florida, as well as special weather statements, please visit the national weather service in Miami website at www.weather.gov/southflorida.

For general lightning safety tips as well as educational material, please visit the National Weather Service lightning safety page at www.lightningsafety.noaa.gov.